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ABSTRACT

An overview is provided of the educational philosophies of Allan Bloom, Lynne V. Cheney, William Bennett, and Ernest Boyer, with special focus on their political underpinnings. The essay begins with an examination of the issues discussed in "The Closing of the American Mind," by Allan Bloom. Concern and disagreement is expressed about: (1) Bloom's rejection of an "education of openness," "liberalness," and academic concern with racism, sexism, and elitism; (2) the use of the charge of "nihilism" beyond the boundaries of its genuine applicability; and (3) his attitude toward the superiority of this country and its history which resists self-criticism and approaches an ethnocentric adoration of the American way of life. Concluding comments in this section assert that Bloom is actually calling for the closing of the American mind around what he believes is the only real common good--liberal learning in the classic sense that has traditionally excluded all but the "talented tenth" from full educational opportunity. The next sections find echoes of Bloom's positions in the writings of Lynne V. Cheney, Chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities, and William Bennett, former Secretary of Education. Finally, the paper considers the very different assessment and suggestions made by Ernest L. Boyer and the Commission on the Future of the Community College. Emphasis is placed on the Commission's commitment to "building communities," its positive view of the historical forces shaping community college education, and its support for a multi-cultural and world-historical perspective on social reality through the comparative study of social, natural, intellectual, and art history. (AJL)

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TOWARD A CRITICAL DISCUSSION

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BENNETT, BLOOM and BOYER: Toward A Critical Discussion.

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Introduction.

The following remarks are offered as part of the continuing reexamination of the role and function and future of the humanities in education, especially with regard to the General Education Reform Movement in the community colleges.

Observations made here are intended as a brief and informal contribution toward a critical discussion of the educational philosophical suggestions recently made by William Bennett, Allan Bloom and Ernest Boyer (as well as NEH Chief, Lynne V. Cheney).

At the outset let me make clear that I do not pretend to be an expert on everything these spokespersons have had to say about curricular reform issues of the eighties, nor do I claim to have fully understood everything that I have read by them. What I shall try to do is to identify a few themes which they all address (from divergent perspectives), and I shall propose that these themes are the essential Leitfaden (guiding strand) which we must follow if we are to begin to understand them properly. Much of what they have to say troubles me. I look forward to an exchange of ideas with you about it.

Bloom's book.

In 1987 Allan Bloom published The Closing of the American Mind. Its subtitle reads: "How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students."

In Bloom's estimation college students today are a generally "nice," but listless bunch. He is worried about their lack of spirit, their soullessness. They are unsure about how to distinguish good from evil. Their higher education has been of little assistance in this regard, primarily because of the legacy of value-relativism from the sixties.

[The notion that today's students have such impoverished souls that the nation should be alerted to the crisis, strikes me as particularly lop-sided and quite ironic. A recent edition of Time magazine (May 25, 1987) was in fact devoted to an analysis of Ethics in America, asking "WHAT'S WRONG: Hypocrisy, Betrayal and Greed Unsettle the Nation's Soul." In its review of "Morality Among the Supply-Siders," Time noted that more than 100 Reagan Administration officials (like Michael Deaver, Raymond Donovan, Edwin Meese, Lyn Nofziger, Rita Lavelle, and Anne Burford) have faced allegations of questionable activities culminating in political impropriety on a grand scale. Add to this the disclosures about Ivan Boesky, the Pentagon procurement

scandal, Jim and Tammy Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Oliver North, Gary Hart, the $100 billion Savings and Loan crisis (resulting largely from managerial fraud and rip-offs), and it seems odd, to say the least, to claim that it is students who are having particular trouble with their souls. How many of the central figures in these business/political scandals were either sixties students or educated during the seventies or eighties by professors inspired by the spirit of the sixties?]

Bloom's preliminary definition of the problem.

Bloom writes of "The Closing of the American Mind." The very appeal of this title seems to rest on the implication that he is a proponent of open-mindedness as an antidote to narrowness of intellectual scope. This, however, is not at all the case.

Quite to the contrary, it is the sixties "education of openness" that is held to be responsible for the contemporary educational predicament.

Bloom rejects this "education of openness" (27) because it "is open to all kinds of men, all kinds of life-styles, all ideologies. There is no enemy other than the man who is not open to everything." (27) "Liberalism . . . the kind we knew from John Stuart Mill and John Dewey, taught us that the only danger confronting us is being closed . . ." (29)

"Openness was designed to provide a respectable place for these 'groups' or 'minorities' -- to wrest respect from those who were not inclined to give it -- and to weaken the sense of superiority of the dominant majority . . . That dominant majority gave the country a dominant culture with its traditions, its literature, its tastes, its special claim to know and supervise the language, and its Protestant religions." (31)

The teachers of openness want "to propagandize the acceptance of different ways" (35) ostensibly as part of the effort "to establish a world community and train its member -- the person devoid of prejudice." (36)

"Practically all that young Americans have today is an insubstantial awareness that there are many cultures, accompanied by a saccarine moral drawn from that awareness: We should all get along. Why fight?" (35)

"One of the techniques of opening young people up is to require a college course in a non-Western culture." (35)

Bloom is of the mind that by doing this "openness to closedness" is what is actually being taught. Open-mindedness is really closed-mindedness to the recognition that the ways of the Western world are in fact better. Instead, it appears to be "just another culture." (39)

"The United States is one of the highest and most extreme achievements of the rational quest for the good life according to nature. . . An openness that denies the special claim of reason bursts the mainspring keeping the mechanism of this regime in motion." (39)

"The unrestrained and thoughtless pursuit of openness . . . has rendered openness meaningless" (38)

"Thus what is advertised as a great opening is a great closing" (34)

Bloom's argument, thus far, seems marred by an infuriating double-speak that appears all the more twisted in the following comments:

"When I was a young teacher at Cornell, I once had a debate about education with a professor of psychology. He said that it was his function to get rid of prejudices in his students. . . I found myself responding to the professor of psychology that I personally tried to teach my students prejudices. . . Prejudices, strong prejudices, are visions about the way things are. They are divinations of the order of the whole of things, and hence the road to knowledge of that whole is by way of erroneous opinions about it." (42-43)

In the end then, openness is closedness, but <u>closedness is openness</u>: closedness is an openness to the quest for knowledge and certitude. "To be open to knowing, there are certain kinds of things one must know which most people don't want to bother to learn and which appear boring and irrelevant. . . So the university that stands intransigently for humane learning must necessarily look closed and rigid." (41,42)

<u>Bloom's big complaints.</u>

Bloom laments the rather recent demise of the American Pageant version of American history:

> But the unity, grandeur and attendant folklore of the founding heritage was attacked from so many directions in the last half-century that it gradually disappeared from daily life and textbooks. It all began to seem like Washington and the cherry tree -- not the sort of thing to teach children seriously. . . Then there was Marxist debunking of the Charles Beard variety, trying to demonstrate that there was no public spirit, only private concern for property, in the Founding Fathers, thus weakening our convictions of the truth and superiority of American principles and our heroes. . . the radicals in the civil rights movement succeeded in promoting a popular conviction that the Founding was, and the American principles are, racist. . . Thus, openness has driven out the local deities, leaving only the speechless, meaningless country. (56)

In addition to this reprehensible open-minded concern for the historical issues of class and race, Bloom has strong misgivings about our contemporary concern for questions of gender discrimination:

> The latest enemy of the vitality of the classic texts is feminism. The struggles against elitism and racism in the sixties and seventies had little direct effect on students' relations to books. . . But all literature up to today is sexist. The Muses never sang to the poets about liberated women. (65)

What is more, American professors during the sixties could apparently think of nothing better to do than to promote equality and combat racism, sexism, elitism and war.

> Socrates thought it more important to discuss justice, to try to know what it is, than to try to engage himself in whatever partial perspective on it happened to be exciting the passions of the day, causing the contemplative to be called unjust and impious.
>
> Of course anyone who is a professional contemplative holding down a prestigious and well-paying job, and who also believes there is nothing to contemplate, finds himself in a difficult position with respect to himself and the community. The imperative to promote equality, stamp out racism, sexism and elitism (the peculiar crimes of our democratic society), as well as war, is overriding for a man who can define no other interest worthy of defending. . . the universities gave way under the pressure of mass movements, and did so in large measure because they thought those movements possessed a moral truth superior to any the university could provide. (314)

Here we have mention made of all of the major themes that link the contemporary debates on the aims and purposes of higher education together: these revolve around the terms equality, race, gender, war, and community. In Bloom's estimation, because American professors "collaborated" with the student movements of the sixties, we now face the "decomposition" of the university. William Bennett and Lynne V. Cheney, as we shall show below, are in substantial agreement with Bloom's assessment. Ernest Boyer's recommendations on the future of the community colleges, it should be noted in passing, stand in sharp contrast.

Bloom recounts the history of higher education in the West in a lengthy portion of his book, "From Socrates' Apology to Heidegger's Rektoratsrede." Just what is the nature of this process of transformation as Bloom sees it? In his estimation, it is not the Advancement of Learning that has occurred, but the Advent of Nihilism. Good and Evil are no longer taken seriously. Instead groundless decisions create "values" ex nihilo.

The Apology is the account of the trial and execution of Socrates; the source of the famous quotation, "the unexamined life is not worth

living." With Heidegger's Rektoratsrede, the man whom Bloom considers to be quite unfortunately the most powerful intellectual of our time committed himself to the Nazi cause. As Bloom sees it, in Heidegger's philosophy reason itself is rejected by philosophy itself. Higher education is plunged into an abyss of irrationalism and nothingness. This nihilism means that there is really nothing left for which anyone can truly take a stand. The renewed contemplation of Socrates is, thus, our most urgent task, for it is only a study of a life like his that may give us back our reasons for being. This does indeed sound plausible, even worthy. But I believe that Bloom has nonetheless overstated his case and that he uses the nihilism charge beyond the boundries of its genuine applicability.

In his section, "Nihilism, American Style," Bloom argues that we are de-spirited today because we have imported "a clothing of German fabrication for our souls, which . . . cast doubt on the Americanization of the world on which we had embarked. . . " (152)

According to Bloom, the wrong-headed open-mindedness of the Left in sixties America was inspired by a language derived from nihilism. Aspects of Heidegger's and Nietzsche's philosophical nihilism are thought to have become part of American slang. Bloom abhors the popularization of German philosophy (including the Marxist variety) in the USA.

> Conflict is the evil we most want to avoid, among nations, among individuals and within ourselves. Nietzsche sought with his value philosophy to restore the harsh conflicts for which men were willing to die, to restore the tragic sense of life, at a moment when nature had become domesticated and men become tame. That value philosophy was used in America for exactly the opposite purpose -- to promote conflict resolution, bargaining, harmony. If it is only a difference in values, then conciliation is possible. We must respect values, but they must not get in the way of peace. (228-229)

> Our desire for conflict resolution accounts for the great popularity of the word "dialectic" -- in our sense, the Marxist sense -- for, beginning in opposites it ends in synthesis, all charms and temptations united in harmony. . . Marx's dialectic takes place in deed and culminates in the classless society, which also puts an end to theoretical conflicts, now known as ideologies. Historical dialectic provides an absolute ground and happy resolution for our relative life-styles. (229)

This is the language of nihilism according to Bloom: value-relativism is taken as a great release from the stresses of an absolute conception of good and evil. "The opposition between good and evil is not negotiable and is a cause of war. Those who are interested in 'conflict resolution' find it much easier to reduce the tension between values than between good and evil." (142)

Bloom opposes this kind of "nihilism" and relativism: he apparently wants to give us a reason to fight! Moral re-armament is the task he sets for himself and American higher education. No more weakening of our convictions with regard to the superiority of American principles! The decline of this nation and the decomposition of its colleges has gone quite far enough!

At this juncture I would like to remind you of the similar sentiments contained in the 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education, expressed in the urgent tones of military preparedness:

> Our nation is at risk. Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. . .If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might have viewed it as an act of war. . . We have in effect been committing an act of unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament. . .History is not kind to idlers. (Chronicle May 4, 1983 p. 11)

Bloom argues the moral superiority of the West in general and the USA in particular. He claims that it is only the West that has developed the philosophical spirit of self-criticism: "Only in the Western nations,i.e., those influenced by Greek philosophy, is there some willingness to doubt the identification of the good with one's own way." (36)

While this may be so, Bloom's attitude toward this country and its history seems, as we have seen above, to resist self-criticism and approach an uncritical adoration of the American way of life.

His book concludes in this vein:

> This is the American moment in world history, the one for which we shall forever be judged. Just as in politics the responsibility for the fate of freedom in the world has devolved upon our regime, so the fate of philosophy in the world has devolved upon our universities, and the two are related as they have never been before. The gravity of our given task is great, and it is very much in doubthow the future will judge our stewardship. (382)

Bloom is then actually calling for the closing of the American mind around what he believes is the only real common good: liberal learning in its classic sense. While higher education in the humanities has generally been thought of as pursuing universally human aims and goals, Bloom is quite unwilling to admit that historically however a cultural politics of class, a cultural politics of race, and a cultural politics of gender have set very definite limitations to the actualization of the humane concerns of a liberal arts education.

Rather, Bloom relies on the frayed credo that has helped exclude all but the "talented tenth" from full educational opportunity (where that tenth is already made up of those persons whose social standing virtually assures them a favored niche in an economy that generates private wealth on the basis of exploitation and discrimination according to class position, race and sex).

> The real community of man. . .is the community of those who seek the truth, of the potential knowers, that is, in principle, of all men to the extent that they desire to know. But in fact this includes only a few, the true friends, as Plato was to Aristotle at the very moment they were disagreeing about the nature of the good. (381)

Bloom's best seller has been (in my estimation rightly) called racist and elitist by former SUNY chancellor, Clifton J. Wharton, in a 1988 address to the American Association of Colleges and reported page one in the Chronicle January 20, 1988. Similarly, Martha Nussbaum has found his scholarship idiosyncratic and at places indefensible: "Bloom knows that he knows. Socrates knew that he didn't." (Martha Nussbaum, "Allan Bloom's American Mind," The New York Review of Books, Nov. 5, 1987, p.21).

Cheney's echo of Bloom.

The Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, Lynne V. Cheney, has just issued the "Humanities in America: A Report to the President, the Congress and the American People."

Ms. Cheney, like Bloom, sees disturbing trends in the humanities today. She writes:

> Viewing humanities texts as though they were primarily political documents is the most noticable trend in the academic study of the humanities today. Truth and beauty and excellence are regarded as irrelevant; questions of intellectual and aesthetic quality, dismissed. . . The key questions are thought to be about gender, race, and class. What groups did the authors of these works represent? How did their books enhance the social power of those groups over others? . . .
>
> Since Western civilization forms the basis for our society's laws and institutions, it might seem obvious that education should ground the upcoming generation in the Western tradition. It might seem obvious that all students should be knowledgeable about texts that have formed the foundations of the society im which they live. But opponents argue that these works, mostly written by a privileged group of white males, are elitist, racist, and sexist.

> The humanities are about more than politics, about more than social power. What gives them their abiding worth are truths that pass beyond time and circumstance; truths that, transcending class, race, and gender, speak to us all. (Chronicle Sept. 21, 1988 pp.19-20.)

Bennett on Stanford's "capitulation" to pressure.

When Stanford University announced that it was replacing its traditional course in Western Civilization with a course called "Culture, Ideas and Values" (which would include the study of at least one non-Western culture), former Secretary of Education, William Bennett, decreed that "We have seen in this instance the closing of the Stanford mind." (Chronicle April 27, 1988 p. 2)

Bennett said the decision to revise the course was brought about by political pressure and intimidation tactics (there had been demonstrations by Stanford's Black Student Union urging such a change). Bennett lamented that Stanford is controlled by a "standard kind of left wing political agenda" that he described as a "combination of Marxism and feminism." (Ibid.)

Boyer's contrasting assessment and suggestions.

The American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (AACJC) issued a report this year from its Commission on the Future of the Community Colleges. Chaired by Ernest L. Boyer (former SUNY chancellor and US Commissioner of Education, currently Chairman of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching), the Commission's report is titled: BUILDING COMMUNITIES -- A Vision For A New Century.

The report raises questions about the future of community college education, asking in particular how the renewed emphasis on educational excellence can best affect the two-year institutions (and how innovation may help us meet the challenges of the year 2000).

The report directs our attention to the theme of "Building Communities," and presents its perspective with the following watchword:

> "The term community should be defined not only as a region to be served, but also as a climate to be created."

The Boyer committee's historical account of forces shaping community college education is exceedingly important. In sharp contrast to Bennett, Bloom and Cheney, Boyer views the recent past quite positively and sees it as inspiration for the future:

> The network of community, technical, and junior colleges in America is unique and extraordinarily successful. It is, perhaps, the only sector of higher

> education that can truly be called a movement, one in which the members are bound together and inspired by common goals. (5)
>
> From the very first, these institutions, often called "the peoples colleges," have stirred an egalitarian zeal among their members. The open-door policy has been pursued with an intensity and dedication comparable to the Populist, the Civil Rights, and the Feminist crusades. While more elitist institutions may define excellence as exclusion, community colleges have sought excellence in service to the many. While traditional institutions too often have been isolated islands, community colleges have built connections beyond the campus. (5)

Refusing to be intimidated by the "L" words (like egalitarianism, and social movement), this community college report has an entirely different mood than the somber --even backlash -- tones of Bloom and Bennett. Nonetheless, there is much work to be done: a sense of community remains to be built (at the same time as a diversity of students needs to be served). The report's recommendations read in part (and in summary form) as follows:

> We propose, therefore, that the theme "Building Communities," become the new rallying point for the community college in America. . . Building communities is, we believe, an especially appropriate objective for the community college because it embraces the institution's comprehensive mission. (7)
>
> The nation's community colleges should vigorously reaffirm equality of opportunity as an essential goal. Every college should declare, with pride and conviction, its determination to serve all ages and racial and ethnic groups. (10)
>
> All community college associate degree students should complete a core curriculum, one that provides historical perspective, an understanding of our social institutions, knowledge of science and technology, and an appreciation of the visual and performing arts. (19)
>
> We urge that the core curriculum at the community college contain an international perspective, including a study of nonwestern cultures. (19)

On each of the Leitfaden issues mentioned above, the report of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges (AACJC) provides a refreshing counterpoint. Its emphasis on the need for our community to be held together by a larger vision of humanity and the world is perfectly consistent with higher education's time-honored task of providing a multi-cultural and world-historical perspective on our shared social reality. It also stresses that a broadly-based

internationalist awareness may well be cultivated, both for its general educational value and for its practical utility in a world of increasingly interdependent economies. The Commission concludes that "the community colleges have an urgent obligation to keep students informed about people and cultures other than their own, and that the building of partnerships must be not only local and national, but global, too. In the century ahead, parochialism is not an option." (31-32)

As might be expected, the report stresses that the teaching staff has an important role to play in overcoming the fragmentation that is sometimes displayed in cultural separation and racial tensions. It is optimistic that the community college's core of dedicated teachers (which, after all, has always been the source of intellectual enrichment on the campus) will be willing and able to promote a multi-dimensional understanding of cultures and, in so doing, form a more comprehensive vision for students and colleagues. It urges us, as faculty, to call on one another (as well as our administrators and boards) to implement and amplify the important internationalist and multi-cultural components of our current obligation to excellence in teaching.

Conclusion.

Bloom, Bennett, Cheney and Boyer are debating the very foundations of education in the United States. Their remarks embody rival conceptions of educational philosophy. The central issues they address tell us something not only of the condition of U.S. higher education, but of the condition of U.S. society as well. Several issues stand out as the interrelated concerns at the core of the debate: the impact (or lack thereof) of social inequalities of class, race and sex upon higher education in the U.S., as well as the concepts of community and conflict (war). These issues relate not only to the "canon" utilized in Western civilization coursework, but the impact of these factors on the social dimensions of our lives in institutions of higher learning. In my review of the contributions of Bennett, Bloom and Boyer to this debate, I have attempted to clarify the political philosophical nature of these (never "purely" educational) issues.

It is my opinion that in the sixties America was educated not only by its professoriate, but by social movements. I would agree with Boyer that these movements helped make reform in higher education occur where it was needed and that these reforms have made the colleges of the eighties better places. I see Boyer's recommendations as not only appropriate for the community colleges, but for four-year institutions as well.

My comments have been impressionistic rather than rigorously systematic. Thus, they are meant to be suggestive -- a basis for discussion -- rather the last word. Nonetheless, I hope to have directed our attention to some of the central contradictory positions and forces currently impinging on the future of the humanities.

It is my opinion that the recent national mood of fiscal conservatism (promoted by Reaganomics and Reagan appointees) has brought with it an era of political and philosophical conservatism. Retrenchment measures have often been the hidden agenda of calls for "quality control." I for one am unwilling to see the educational gains of the last two decades atrophy in the name of "excellence." Certainly the social and activist approach and the kind of relevance the humanities possessed in the sixties would horrify a Mr. Bennett or Bloom. I, on the other hand, am very impatient with the backlash college-bashing and sixties-bashing they have undertaken. It is not the sacred tradition of the Paedagogia perennis that is to preserved at all costs, but rather a critical appreciation for its "rational kernel." It is absolutely necessary that the humanities help us attain the full social, political and philosophical potential of the human species. They can do this by developing an international and world-historical perspective on knowledge, through the comparative study of social history, natural history, art history and intellectual history. It is precisely this which can enhance the formation of a non-alienated character, conscience and culture for the human race.

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